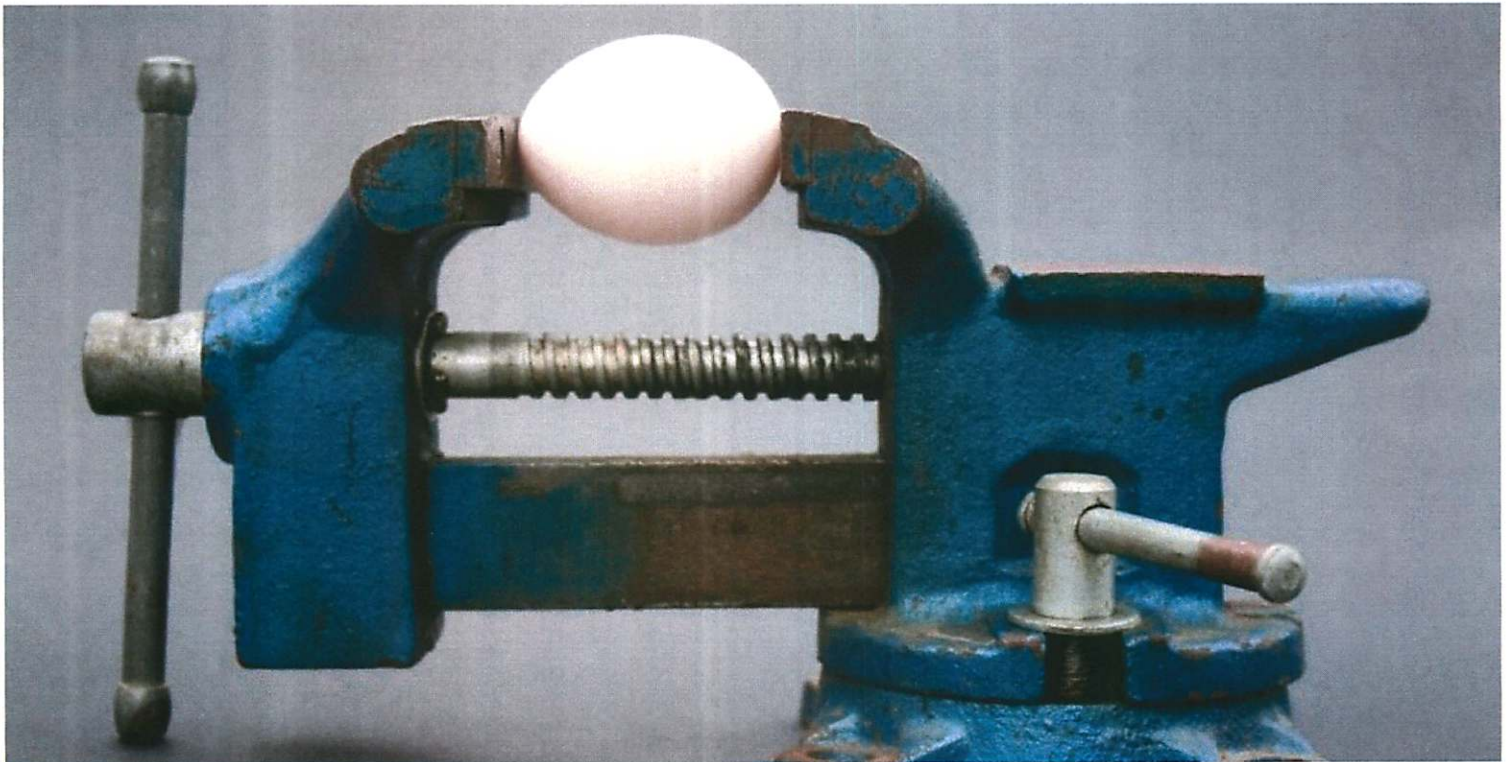




Amy Showalter April 3rd, 2014

Persuasion vs. Pressure: Do You Want Long-Term Influence or Short-Term Coercion?



A client sent me a “white paper” article published last year which aroused my interest in part because the title was “Pressure vs Persuasion: The Overlooked Secret to Winning Your Advocacy Campaign.” Considering the title, I was hooked and immediately started reading. My effusive reaction changed as I continued to read.

The authors were trying to help frustrated advocacy professionals find alternatives to typical grassroots advocacy tactics, something we all want. I have not yet met a grassroots professional who isn’t interested in how to make their message stand out amidst the cacophony of grassroots messages.

However, their manifesto asserted that groups focus too much on persuading decision makers rather than pressuring them. Yes, you read that correctly, I am not making this up. Maybe we have a different definition of pressure and persuasion. What pressure means to me is: threats, shows of force, unrelenting insistence, harassment, and coercion. We need to understand the ramifications of using pressure vs. persuasion as a way to influence elected officials.

As I read their rationale for pressure tactics, I thought “Gee, it must be nice to be able to coerce legislators into action without any consideration of future influence attempts—what a luxury!” I could not identify with that premise because the thousands of government relations professionals I have worked with as clients, at my conferences, and via staff retreats constantly express the challenge of long-term influence. They just do not have the option to coerce legislators, particularly because they plan to work with them again in the future.

I also found the article intriguing because my book, [The Underdog Edge](http://www.underdogedge.com/) ([/web/20141125183541/http://www.underdogedge.com/](http://www.underdogedge.com/)), is based on primary research with powerful people who have had their minds changed by “ordinary” people. I interviewed people from all sides of the political spectrum. What I found is that maintaining a positive relationship with one’s influence prospect is critical to eventually changing their mind. And guess what the powerful people whose minds were changed told me? They said that they did not change their minds when they felt coerced or pressured. To them, pressure is not “nice” behavior, and failure to be nice made them more recalcitrant.

What’s Wrong with a Little Pressure?

As my colleague, Dr. Kelton Rhoads of USC’s Annenberg School stated, “People who think about influence as a ‘list of tricks to manipulate people’—which is, by the way, what many people think—these folks are thinking about coercion tactics. I have a few simple questions I ask to determine whether a particular tactic is persuasion or coercion. I ask: ‘If your prospects knew what tactics you were using, would they be resentful? Are the tactics being used strengthening or weakening relationships?’ “

Pressure is a coercion tactic. Coercion implies a quick-fix influence solution. It’s designed to obtain a behavior regardless how the target thinks, regardless of the target’s position or belief system. These tactics can be effective in the short-term, but they set up long-term failure, because they erode relationships and their effectiveness generally diminishes over time.

Persuasion Isn’t “Winning an Argument”

The authors also defined persuasion as “winning an argument” and that pressure is about “winning over your decision makers.” How pressure “wins someone over” is perplexing.

The evidence based research on this topic is clear that persuasion has little to do with argumentation. Persuasion is a result that manifests itself in maintaining positive attitudes, garnering allegiance, friendship, loyalty and liking. It seldom occurs quickly. Its cornerstone is a mutually beneficial relationship between yourself and your influence prospect.

Help Them Help You

The late great [Zig Ziglar](http://www.ziglar.com/quotes) ([/web/20141125183541/http://www.ziglar.com/quotes](http://www.ziglar.com/quotes)) said: “You can have everything in life you want, if you will just help other people get what they want.” From my research, legislators are simple. They want to be a hero and to leave a legacy. They also want to help their friends who knew them during their nascent political careers, and to help enact policies favored by those who can vote for them. The influence strategies to get them to agree with your cause are not always simple, because the context of any influence situation changes, requiring savvy influencers to adapt accordingly. Pressure and its cousin, coercion, are simple, but they do not help elected officials get what they want.

Again, maybe we just disagree on the definition of the word “pressure.” I guess the groups referenced in the article have the option of alienating elected officials and they won’t need to work with them in the future—and if that’s your situation, maybe that is the right approach. If, however, you’re like most of us and have to work on

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long-term issues with the same elected officials, success is about influence, winning hearts and minds, and mutually beneficial relationships. Not pressure.

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